11-1-2003

The Prospect of Multi-Level Voting in Post-Peace Accord Northern Ireland

Roger Mac Ginty

University of York, rm17@york.ac.uk

NSU
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY
NSU Libraries

The Prospect of Multi-Level Voting in Post-Peace Accord Northern Ireland

Abstract

This article reviews the possibility of multi-level voting in Northern Ireland in the wake of the 1998 peace accord. Post-peace accord elections can act as powerful indicators of the fate of a peace. Using Reif and Schmitt's framework of second-order elections, it finds some evidence of varying electoral behaviour according to the electoral arena. The article also uses original data from a major opinion survey to assess public attitudes towards the suite of governing institutions with powers in or over a devolved Northern Ireland. The evidence of multi-level voting is limited and does not extend to electors abandoning ethnic voting patterns in the new political dispensation. In fact, it is argued that the very nature of the peace process has encouraged a re-entrenchment of exclusive nationalism and unionism.

Author Bio(s)

Roger Mac Ginty is a lecturer at the Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit in the Department of Politics, University of York. His main research interests lie in the management of violence and peace processes. His latest book (edited with John Darby) is Contemporary Peacemaking: Conflict, violence and peace processes (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). He has also published articles in American Behavioral Scientist, Civil Wars, Government and Opposition, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, Regional and Federal Studies and Third World Quarterly.

THE PROSPECT OF MULTI-LEVEL VOTING IN POST-PEACE ACCORD NORTHERN IRELAND

Roger Mac Ginty

Abstract

This article reviews the possibility of multi-level voting in Northern Ireland in the wake of the 1998 peace accord. Post-peace accord elections can act as powerful indicators of the fate of a peace. Using Reif and Schmitt's framework of second-order elections, it finds some evidence of varying electoral behaviour according to the electoral arena. The article also uses original data from a major opinion survey to assess public attitudes towards the suite of governing institutions with powers in or over a devolved Northern Ireland. The evidence of multi-level voting is limited and does not extend to electors abandoning ethnic voting patterns in the new political dispensation. In fact, it is argued that the very nature of the peace process has encouraged a re-entrenchment of exclusive nationalism and unionism.

Introduction

Northern Ireland's 1998 Belfast Agreement saw the introduction of a new set of governing institutions, including an elected powersharing assembly. The new political configuration offered the possibility of changes in voting behaviour in a society characterized by profound ethnonational fissures and entrenched ethnic voting patterns. This article assesses if there has been any evidence of multi-level voting in Northern Ireland in the wake of devolution from the United Kingdom. Multi-level voting, as identified by Reif and Schmitt (1980), notes variations in electoral behaviour according to electoral arena. In other words, the article considers if has devolution and the context of a peace accord has caused significant changes in voting patterns in Northern Ireland.

Following a brief contextual overview of Northern Ireland's peace process and accord, the article considers the implications of elections in the aftermath of peace accords in cases of ethnonational conflicts. Then, using Reif and Schmitt's second-order election model, the article examines trends in post-accord elections in Northern Ireland, with particular reference to levels of participation and the development of new and small political parties. A discussion of Northern Ireland's voting patterns, as measured against the second-order election model, then follows and is aided by material from the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey of political attitudes. This material reinforces the argument that Northern Ireland's electors view the Northern Ireland Assembly (a 'second-order' institution) as first order. The wider question of the implications of elections in post-accord peacebuilding is also revisited in the discussion section.

The Northern Ireland peace process and accord

Briefly, the Northern Ireland conflict is between two sets of nationalism, broadly fitting into the Protestant-unionist-loyalist bloc who favour continued maintenance of the Union with the United Kingdom, and the pro-united Ireland Catholic-nationalist-republican bloc (Whyte, 1991; O'Leary & McGarry, 1993). Both groups share the same territory, and although the Northern Ireland state (founded in 1921) has always had a Protestant majority, the Catholic minority has been of sufficient size to maintain Protestant anxiety. The macro problems of the contested legitimacy of the state were reflected at the issue level where policing, employment and social provision by the state had a distinctly sectarian flavour. From the late 1960s onwards, nationalist discontent developed into disorder and, eventually, political violence. A low level triangular insurgency between the British state, loyalist and republican insurgents cost over 3,000 lives in the 1968-94 period (Fay, Morrissey & Smyth: 1999).

The peace process of the 1990s emerged from a classic 'mutually hurting stalemate' (Zartman, 1989) in which the antagonists realised that unilateral action, by themselves or others actors, would not be enough to bring major qualitative change to an entrenched conflict. Of mutual interest was a lowering of the costs of the conflict. The sovereign power in Northern Ireland, the British government, recognised from the mid-1980s onwards that the Irish government (as proxy guardians of Northern Ireland's nationalist minority) should be involved in any concerted attempt to manage the conflict. There followed the development of a remarkable British-Irish intergovernmental relationship (Arthur, 2000). The two governments adopted the principle of inclusion through which (violent) veto-holders with the potential to destabilise any agreement from without were consciously included in peace talks. With the two governments acting as custodians of a developing peace process, loyalist and republican militants felt confident enough to call ceasefires and allow Northern Ireland's political parties to investigate proposals for the governance of Northern Ireland that would offer guarantees to the two main communities. Intensive multi-party talks held in 1997-98 were not without drama and interruption but an agreement was reached in April 1998 (Mac Ginty & Darby, 2002).

At 10,000 words, the Belfast Agreement was a complex document that confirmed Northern Ireland's constitutional status within the United Kingdom (Wilford, 2001; Bell, 2001; Horowitz, 2002). Northern Ireland's constitutional status would be linked to popular support, with both governments pledged to facilitate Irish unification if this was the popular will. Three new institutions were established to deal with the complex set of relationships that defined the Northern Ireland conflict. An Assembly with a powersharing Executive would serve relationships in Northern Ireland. A North-South Ministerial Council would allow for functional cooperation between the Irish government and the Northern Ireland Executive on selected matters. A British-Irish Council would provide a forum for cooperation between representatives from elected institutions across the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Alongside the new institutional architecture, the Agreement made provision for the early release of prisoners from militant groups, reform of the police force and criminal justice system, and the establishment of bodies with oversight on equality and human rights (Bell, 2001). In short, the Agreement ushered in an advanced form of consociational government that aimed to defer constitutional issues

and allow the development of cooperative relationships on the day-to-day governance of Northern Ireland.

Post-peace accord elections

Elections in the aftermath of a peace accord have the capacity to act as powerful indicators of the 'state of the peace' (Reilly, 2001; Reilly & Reynolds, 1999; Sisk & Reynolds, 1998). This can operate in a direct sense through an election (often a referendum) on a peace agreement. Similarly, support for moderate or extremist candidates or parties standing in local, regional or national elections may be gauged as a reinforcement or threat to post-accord peacebuilding. But elections can also act as indirect indicators, pointing to more subjective, and highly political concepts of moderation, respect for constitutional due process, and acceptance of diversity.

Electoral processes can have incredible importance in awarding or stripping peace accords and political dispensations established under them with popular legitimacy. The very staging of an election, the manner in which the election is run, the nature of the political parties and candidates, the issues that dominate the campaign, and the size and variety of parties can all have profound implications for the post-accord transition. To go through these in more detail, the holding of an election suggests capability and administrative competence, proficiencies not guaranteed in post-accord polities in which census data, if in existence, may be unreliable due to selective counting or enforced population shifts. Moreover, the holding of an election – by definition a major public event – may provide an opportunity to draw a line in the sand or to publicly mark the transition from conflict to 'peace'. The manner in which the election is run may also be indicative of the post-accord peacebuilding phase of a peace process. Whether the campaign is marked by violence or intimidation, or the need for external guarantors in the form of peacekeepers or election monitors, may reflect the extent to which key principles underlying a peace accord have been internalised. Respect for the outcome of the election, particularly among majorities and powerholders, will be a crucial portent for the post-accord period.

The nature and composition of political parties is also important, with a number of post-accord locations witnessing the almost overnight metamorphosis of militant groups into political parties. The development of political parties along this model may be a sign that politics will retrench rather than break from ethnic fissures. The issues that dominate post-accord election campaigns can be important in signalling the 'health' of the transition. This is particularly the case with regard to elections after the initial peace accord period. The extent to which the issue agenda has remained focused on ethnic and conflict related issues, as opposed to more functional public policy issues, may indicate the degree to which a conflict is still alive and resistant to peacebuilding initiatives (Reilly, 2003).

The variety of political parties able to contest the post-accord elections may also inform observers about the nature of the post-accord political environment. A wide range of parties may not necessarily indicate political pluralism or tolerance from centres of authority. Instead, it may be a function of the type of electoral system, the fragmentation of ethno-political blocs, and political geography.

The timing of post-accord elections has attracted due attention, with critics pointing to the dangers of premature elections and how they are often held at the behest of the international community and are staged before the development of a broad-based 'democratic infrastructure'. Of equal importance in terms of timing, is the staging of elections subsequent to the initial post-accord election. In a number of post-accord societies parliamentary or presidential elections have been deferred or replaced by 'back me or sack me' referendums staged by the incumbent. A peaceful transition from the first post-accord leadership to its successor leadership can be taken as a sign of the institutionalisation of the post-accord political dispensation.

The fundamental issue is whether post-accord elections are short-term events or part of long-term processes. Elections have the capacity to have 'an ambiguous relationship' to democracy, inflaming the conflict and retarding long-term democratisation (Lyon, 2002: 217). International 'best practice' during the 1990s saw an emphasis on the quantification of democracy through electoral processes. The symbolic content of post-accord elections is high (Mac Ginty, 2001: 1-21), but the ability of a democratic political cultural to become embedded in the society and polity is more significant.

Northern Ireland, as part of an established democratic state, was without many of the basic post-accord electoral problems found in many other societies. There was a long tradition of elections, established sophisticated political parties and – despite persistent claims of electoral fraud - accurate electoral registers. Notwithstanding this history of electoral competition, Northern Ireland's post accord elections are of enormous importance in providing evidence of the outworking of its peace accord. In the three years following the Belfast Agreement five elections were held: a referendum on the Agreement (May 1998) and elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly (June 1998), European Parliament (June 1999), Local Government (June 2001), and Westminster (June 2001).

The high number of electoral contests in a relatively short space of time meant that Northern Ireland was in an almost permanent electoral cycle. While the Assembly gave Northern Ireland's four main parties the opportunity to govern for the first time in many years, the switch from election campaigning to sharing power with electoral competitors proved difficult to manage in the delicate infant years of the Assembly. The Ulster Unionist Party, the Democratic Unionist Party, Sinn Féin, and the Social Democratic and Labour Party cooperated as part of the permanent powersharing government, yet they were competitors in elections to other chambers.[i] Reif and Schmitt's second-order election model can help offer insights into the post-Belfast Agreement elections, particularly on issues of participation and the role of small parties.

Second-order elections

Reif and Schmitt's seminal work identified national elections as first-order elections, with other elections designated as second-order. Their interest was in the connection between both sets of elections. The first direct elections to the European Parliament, held across the nine member states in 1979, provided them with an opportunity to compare voting behaviour in a single second-order political arena with nine national, or first-order, arenas. Their framework for the analysis of second-order

elections develops a series of hypotheses on the likely relationship between first and second-order elections (Marsh, 1998). The three main hypotheses are:

1. That second-order elections will witness lower levels of participation.
2. That second–order elections will facilitate the development and growth of new and small political parties.
3. That national government parties will lose popularity in second-order contests.

Reif and Schmitt highlight a number of contextual factors and conditions that should be taken into account when considering the hypotheses, such as possible differences in electoral systems and rules between first and second-order contests, the timing of the second-order election in the national election cycle, and the media attention devoted to the different contests. Essentially though, they highlight the precedence of national political cleavages over factors pertaining to the supra-national institution. In other words, national politics are a key determinant in second-order elections.

Reif and Schmitt's model has subsequently been refined – and largely validated – by others. Norris (1997, 109-114) refers to it as 'strikingly prescient and immensely influential.' Marsh (1998) tests it against four European elections in the 1979-97 period and finds it largely robust. Others have investigated the first and second-order election model in relation to national and sub-national elections. McAllister (2000, 211-222), writing on the 1999 elections to the Welsh National Assembly, identifies a low turnout and 'a much more deliberate, sophisticated series of choices' by voters as validating the notion of elections other than to the national tier as being 'second-order'.

Our task is to ascertain if Reif and Schmitt's propositions hold true to Northern Ireland in the wake of the devolution of power from London. A validation or rejection of the second-order model may give an indication of the existence and extent of multi-level voting in post-accord Northern Ireland. It may also point towards the electorate's acceptance of the devolved institutions in their own right or the extent to which the devolved exercises have been overshadowed by wider, national political dynamics. The three core propositions for second-order elections (lower participation; growth for small and new parties; and a contraction for government parties) are reviewed in the light of Northern Ireland's first and second-order elections in the 1996-2001 period.[ii] On the basis of the evidence presented below, it is possible to construct a *prima facie* case in support of the first two propositions, although the third proposition has little relevance for Northern Ireland.

An analysis section considers possible reasons for the variations in turnout and small party fortunes in first and second-order contests and highlights the importance of factors specific to Northern Ireland and its peace process. Indeed, the strength of these local factors challenges one of Reif and Schmitt's key propositions: that national politics will be a major determinant on the outcome of second-order contests. While the British government plays a major role at the macro level, for example by setting election dates, Northern Ireland's elections are decided by Northern Ireland-specific factors. In other words, the 'national' in Northern Ireland is Northern Ireland itself, rather than the UK. Added to this is the problem that the 'nation' is deeply divided.

Lower participation?

According to Reif and Schmitt, second-order elections can be characterised by lower participation than in first-order elections. In fact it was a second-order election, the 1998 Northern Ireland Assembly election that recorded the highest turnout in the 1996-2001 period. The 69.9% turnout on that occasion however, was only slightly ahead of Northern Ireland's turnout at the 1997 and 2001 British general elections (67.3% and 68.04% respectively).[iii] In the case of the Assembly election at least, it can be argued that Northern Ireland's electors attached marginally more significance to a second-order rather than first-order contest. The Assembly elections apart, however, turnout for the general elections exceeded that for the other elections in the time-period and does allow a partial validation of Reif and Schmitt's thesis of the precedence of the national political arena.[iv] (See Table 1).

Election	1996 Forum	1997 General Election	1997 Local Govt.	1998 Assembly	1999 European Parliament	2001 Local Govt.	2001 General Election
% Turnout	64.7	67.3	54.7	69.9	57.04	66.02	68.04

Table 1: Turnout in Northern Ireland elections, 1996-2001.

Brighter prospects for small and new parties?

Reif and Schmitt assert that second-order elections will offer brighter prospects for small and new parties. This is potentially significant for a post-accord society since the growth of small and new parties may signal a fragmentation of established ethnic bloc politics. In absolute terms, Northern Ireland has seen a relative proliferation of parties or independent candidates in its second-order contests. Twenty-four separate parties or independents contested the 1996 Forum elections and 33 parties or independents contested the 1998 Assembly election, as against 18 and 16 in the 1997 and 2001 general elections respectively. Indeed, the Forum and Assembly elections witnessed the first electoral outing for a number of new or re-invigorated political parties. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition was formed in advance of the 1996 election, while the Progressive Unionist Party and Ulster Democratic Party, although already in existence, re-entered the electoral process for these elections.

But the figures showing the relative proliferation of parties in second-order contests as opposed to first-order contests are less impressive if the larger number of seats available in the second-order contests is taken into account. In the 1996 Forum election an average of 3.6 candidates stood for each directly elected seat,[v] while an average of 2.7 candidates contested each seat in the 1998 Assembly election. These figures are lower than the average of 6.94 and 5.55 candidates who contested each of Northern Ireland's eighteen seats in the 1997 and 2001 general elections. In the 1999 European election eight parties contested Northern Ireland's three Euro seats, or 2.6 per seat.

Regardless of the actual contestation of elections, Reif and Schmitt's main point was that small and new parties would perform relatively better in second-order than

first-order contests. A constant feature of Northern Ireland's political landscape has been the dominance of four political parties: Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and Sinn Féin. In the period under consideration, they have between them secured an average of 85.16% of votes cast in each election, pointing to significant electoral oligarchy. The highest combined vote for 'the Big Four' (91.89%) occurred in a first-order election (2001 general election) but this was only marginally ahead of the combined 91.36% secured in the 1999 European Parliament elections – a second-order contest. Nevertheless, smaller parties secured 21.05% of the vote in the 1998 Assembly election, with this figure dropping to 8.11% in the 2001 general election, pointing to a validation of Reif and Schmitt's thesis. (See Table 2).

Election	1996 Forum	1997 General Election	1997 Local Government	1998 Assembly	1999 European Parliament	2001 Local Government	2001 General Election
% of votes cast for the 'Big Four'	79.8	86.5	83.2	78.95	91.36	84.48	91.89

Table 2: Combined percentage of the vote for the UUP, DUP, SDLP and SF in 1996-2001 elections

Government parties will lose popularity?

Reif and Schmitt's proposition that government parties will lose popularity in second-order elections is difficult to apply to Northern Ireland given that until the creation of the Assembly none of the parties had been members of a government for some time. If the proposition is modified to say that the dominant (rather than governing) political parties will lose popularity, then, as Table 2 shows, the 'Big Four' did experience some electoral slippage in second-order contests. But to argue this is to stretch Reif and Schmitt beyond their original meaning. Indeed, it is only through the second-order elections to the Assembly that Northern Ireland's parties have experienced government, and as will be argued later, the attitudes to the devolved institutions (rather than performance in them) were key factors in the 2001 general election.

Discussion

On this evidence, it is possible to identify differences between the results in first and second-order elections in Northern Ireland and extend partial validation to the second-order election model. Local factors are worth stressing though. Many of the differences between first and second-order elections are specific to Northern Ireland and its peace process and may resist generalisation to other cases.

Turnout is highest in the 1998 Assembly election, but is generally higher in first-order elections.

It is unsurprising that turnout in the 1998 election to the devolved Assembly surpassed that for other elections. This was not a simple case of a re-arrangement of the locus of power from the centre to the periphery. Instead, the creation of the Assembly marked the institutional culmination of a complex and long-running peace process. Public interest was immense, as evidenced by the 81% turnout in the May 1998 referendum on the Belfast Agreement. The establishment of an Assembly *per se* met with relatively little opposition in the multi-party talks leading to the Belfast Agreement. Virtually everything else connected with the Assembly was contested though. The new institution's name, location, size, method of election, number and competence of departments, and linkages with other bodies created under the Belfast Agreement, were all the subject of argument.

There was much at stake for both communities. The 1998 referendum is thought to have produced a fairly even split between pro and anti-Agreement unionists (although both sides claimed to represent a majority of unionists) (Mitchell, 2001; 30-31). Most opposition came from the DUP, although substantial numbers of UUP supporters, including senior party figures, were opposed to the Agreement. Points of opposition were numerous, including the early release programme for paramilitary prisoners, the failure of paramilitary organisations to disarm and the prospect of major police reform. Perhaps the key sticking point for unionists was the prospect of the inclusion of Sinn Féin, whom they regarded as unreconstructed terrorists, in the new powersharing coalition Executive.[vi]

Rather than boycotting the elections, anti-Agreement unionists were determined that 'No' voters should be represented in the Assembly. The Democratic Unionists, who had been absent from the political negotiations leading to the Belfast Agreement and who were bitterly opposed to the Agreement, nonetheless promised electors that they would 'be hard at work *in* the new Assembly representing your interests' (emphasis added. DUP, 1998). Other anti-Agreement unionists, in the form of the United Kingdom Unionist Party, termed the election as 'one FINAL CHANCE' to counter a range of perceived threats, including 'a return to full scale violence' and 'armed terrorists governing you' (UKUP, 1998).

The official message from the Ulster Unionist Party accentuated the positive. UUP leader David Trimble noted that, 'We have the chance to move into a new era for the sake of our children and to seize the enormous economic benefits that will flow from the Agreement. For this we need to elect members dedicated to progress, not those there to wreck this chance or merely to oppose and complain about everything (UUP, 1998).' The result was an emotive and bitter election campaign within unionism.

Nationalists and republicans needed no encouragement to contest this election. Their traditional suspicions of Northern Ireland assemblies as 'internal settlements' had been assuaged by a number of guarantees linked to the establishment of the Assembly, particularly the 'all-Ireland' dimension afforded by the North-South Ministerial Council. For the two main nationalist parties, the SDLP and Sinn Féin, the Assembly represented an opportunity wrest power from Westminster. For republicans, it was another step in the broader nationalist project of moving towards a united Ireland, with Sinn Féin terming the election 'a watershed moment in our history which must be seized' (Sinn Féin, 1998a). The election also represented an opportunity to resume battle for supremacy within the nationalist community.

Most Northern Ireland elections are keenly contested, with the unionist-nationalist constitutional cleavage also containing bitter intra-community competitions. But the 1998 Assembly election had an additional novelty and seriousness. There was a public understanding that this was a defining moment in the peace process, and would shape the new political dispensation. The Assembly may have been a subordinate institution, but for the main ethnic parties, it was essential that they secure maximum ownership of that institution and effect maximum denial to their political opponents. As a Sinn Féin election leaflet put it: 'Your vote can maximise nationalist strength, deliver real change and advance Irish unity' (Sinn Féin, 1998b).

The 1998 Assembly election aside, turnout has been highest in first-order contests. It is difficult to argue that this was for anything other than local reasons. With the exception of a Conservative fragment (securing 0.3% of the vote in Northern Ireland in June 2001), the British parties do not stand for election in Northern Ireland. Nor has there been a recent need for Northern Ireland's parties to contribute to Westminster coalition governments.[vii] The trends and issues affecting the outcome of the general election in England, Scotland and Wales have little bearing in Northern Ireland. Commenting in the *Guardian* during the 2001 general election campaign, Matthew Engel described Northern Ireland's electoral exceptionalism in somewhat graphic terms:

> Elections in Britain are essentially homogenous: about the same arguments with local variations. But out here [Northern Ireland] the dispute between Blair and Hague and is barely even reported; Northern Ireland, as ever, disappeared up its own backside. It's as though the PM's [Prime Minister's] decision to call an election also triggered a vote in Albania or Alpha Centauri (Guardian, 2001).

Health, education, immigration, Europe, welfare spending and Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's pugilism, the issues that dominated the 2001 general election in England, Scotland and Wales, may as well have been issues from another planet. Northern Ireland's general election was about Northern Ireland itself. But the 2001 general election saw an interesting twist. While the national issue (Northern Ireland's constitutional status) continued to dominate, attitudes to the Assembly gave entrenched disputes a new spin. In something of a reversal of the Reif and Schmitt thesis, issues germane to a second-order political arena dominated a first-order contest.

Ever since April 1998, the Agreement (and by extension the Assembly) had dominated political debate in Northern Ireland. The traditional unionist-nationalist cleavage remained largely intact, but the Agreement gave it a new focal point and arenas of contestation. Post-Agreement politics revolved around rejection or acceptance of, deviation from, breaches of, implementation of, reviews of, and interpretations of the Agreement. As a result, the Agreement and its implications were the key issues in the June 1999 European and June 2001 Westminster elections, particularly within unionism.

In fact, the DUP (1999) attempted to recast the European elections into a re-run of the referendum on the Agreement, describing it as electors' 'only chance to reverse the treachery of the past year' and urging voters to give their leader Ian Paisley his highest ever vote. The Assembly was at the centre of the UUP general election

campaign. Their election literature told voters: 'The choice couldn't be clearer. The DUP want to destroy the Agreement, bringing down our Stormont Assembly. [UUP leader] David Trimble…needs every vote in order to stop them' (UUP, 2001). David Trimble even made his pledge to resign as Assembly First Minister if the IRA refused to move on arms decommissioning a centre-piece of his Westminster campaign. In a sense, the first-order contest focused almost exclusively on issues relevant to the second-order arena.

Second-order elections offer opportunities for new and small parties. Northern Ireland's second-order elections, particularly the 1996 Forum and 1998 Assembly elections, have seen a proliferation of small and new parties. The peculiar circumstances of the peace process go a long way in explaining this phenomenon. A key factor has been the fragmentation of the unionist vote. Peace processes place political and military actors under enormous pressures, confronting them with new experiences, discourses, propositions and compromises (Darby & Mac Ginty 2003). While some political actors may be tempted to investigate compromise and pragmatism, others may take a more principled or resolute stand. The Northern Ireland peace process posed unionists, and the UUP in particular, with a series of difficult choices. The essential issue was one of whether they should engage with a peace process based on the idea of including those linked with militant organisations. For many within the UUP, and unionism in general, this meant compromising basic democratic principles. Once involved in the peace process, the dilemma became the extent of the involvement. Ultimately, with the Belfast Agreement, the issue became whether or not the UUP should enter into a powersharing government with Sinn Féin. Each hurdle, and attendant issues involving prisoners, policing and disarmament, placed unionism under immense pressure. Given such a context, it was unsurprising that a mixture of new and longstanding political rivals should attempt to exploit the apparent divisions within unionism when the electoral cycle presented them with the opportunity to do so.

Added to this was the widespread unionist perception of the peace process in terms of concessions and loss. Many unionists regarded the peace process as a nationalist project in origin and design and one that would inevitably result in the erosion of the unionist position. In such circumstances, unionists were able to accuse each other of 'selling out', so producing a fertile ground for intra-unionist fissures.

While nationalists and republicans, in the form of the SDLP and Sinn Féin, may have disagreed over the pace and extent of the peace process, they were largely in favour of the process. As a result, there was little evidence of a shredding of the nationalist vote during the peace process. Electoral competition between the SDLP and Sinn Féin was intense, and while Sinn Féin's vote rose from 1996 onwards, the SDLP's vote did not substantially decline (mainly as a result of a growing Catholic population). No serious electoral competitor emerged from within nationalism to threaten the SDLP or Sinn Féin. While Sinn Féin's militant wing suffered desertions and discontent, this was not evident on the electoral front.

The electoral systems chosen for the second-order contests may have also encouraged smaller parties to contest the elections. Certainly this was a conscious aim of those who designed the electoral systems. The principle of inclusion was a cornerstone of the peace process, and in the case of the 1996 Forum election in particular, the electoral system was designed to enhance the chances of the inclusion of

the small loyalist parties in future political negotiations.[viii] If anything, the 'top-up' system chosen was too successful with the tiny Northern Ireland Labour Party securing two 'top-up' seats with 0.85% of the vote.

While we can use peace process-specific factors to explain the relative proliferation and prosperity of new and small parties in second-order elections, it must be noted that many of these factors also pertain to first-order contests in which the 'Big Four' dominate.

Perceptions of the Assembly as a first order chamber

Thus far there is evidence that Northern Ireland's electors regard elections to the devolved second order Assembly as a first order contest. As argued, this is largely a function of factors pertaining to the ethno-national conflict, a conflict that has been - in certain respects - politically radicalised by the peace process. Data from the *Northern Ireland Life and Times* survey of political attitudes reinforces the view that Northern Ireland's electors are willing to regard the Assembly as a first order institution. The survey sample was 1800 adults (67 per cent response rate) and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.[ix] The fieldwork was conducted in October-December 2001. It is worth noting that the period preceding the fieldwork, and the fieldwork period itself, witnessed considerable political instability.

Asked first of all to identify the institution that has most say on how Northern Ireland is run, 51 per cent of respondents identify the UK government at Westminster as the institution wielding most power. (See Table 3). Twenty-eight per cent of respondents said that the Northern Ireland Assembly had most influence. This in itself is a significant figure given the Assembly's uncertain beginnings. Other options, such as local government in Northern Ireland or the European Union attracted little support and it is worth noting that there was little divergence in Catholic and Protestant opinion with regard to where power lies.

	Protestant	Catholic	All
	%	%	%
The Northern Ireland Assembly	29	28	28
The UK government at Westminster	50	53	51
Local Councils in Northern Ireland	6	8	7
The European Union	4	5	4
Other	3	1	2
Don't know	8	6	8

Table 3: Which of the following has most influence over the way Northern Ireland is run?

On the question of which institution *should* hold most influence on the way that Northern Ireland is run, a strong majority (65 per cent) opt for the Assembly. This comprises of majorities of both Catholics and Protestants, with the former more wholehearted in their support for the devolved institution. Seventeen per cent say that the UK government in Westminster should have most power, comprised of just under a quarter of Protestants and only 7 per cent of Catholics. Almost four times as many

people were prepared to award primacy in government to the Stormont Assembly that to the 'mother of all parliaments'. The results indicate that people would like to see more power devolved to Northern Ireland.

	Protestant	Catholic	All
	%	%	%
The Northern Ireland Assembly	61	74	65
The UK government at Westminster	24	7	17
Local Councils in Northern Ireland	6	8	7
The European Union	1	3	2
Other	2	1	2
Don't know	6	7	8

Table 4: Which of the following ought to have most influence over the way Northern Ireland is run?

Given devolution's inauspicious start in Northern Ireland, these figures are remarkable. The summer and autumn of 2001 saw David Trimble's resignation as First Minister in an attempt to force the IRA to begin decommissioning its arms. The period saw intensive political talks convened by the British and Irish governments, two 24 hour 'technical' suspensions of the devolution, an attempt by the UUP and DUP to have Sinn Féin excluded from the Executive, and the resignation of the three UUP ministers from the Executive. The period also saw the 'brawl in the hall' when Members of the Legislative Assembly from a number of parties scuffled in the foyer of the Assembly in front of television cameras, as well as considerable sectarian violence on the streets. In October 2001 the IRA began actual decommissioning, enabling a modicum of political stability to return.

Yet despite this unpromising context, the survey indicates that public faith in the devolved institution remains strong. Other survey results, for example on public perceptions of the Assembly's handling of key policy areas such as health, education and the economy, are less flattering and suggest that public faith in the Assembly is just that: a faith that has yet to be realised. Nevertheless, the survey results reinforce the notion that many people in Northern Ireland regard the Assembly as a first order institution.

A question remains though: do people in Northern Ireland regard the Northern Ireland Assembly as a first order institution as the most appropriate body within which to pursue constitutional issues? Or, do they regard it as an institution in which to prioritise day-to-day issues? The answer to the question is likely to have profound implications for the possibility of multi-level voting in future years.

There are good reasons why electors might be tempted to view the Assembly as yet another, and perhaps as the most appropriate, arena for nationalist-unionist constitutional competition. The Assembly is more immediate and novel than other institutions. It is dedicated to Northern Ireland issues, attracts considerable local media attention, and provides a forum for face-to-face confrontation between nationalists, republicans, unionists and loyalists. If Northern Ireland's electors regard the Assembly as an arena primarily to pursue constitutional claims, then the prospects of multi-level voting will be slim. Assembly elections will merely be an avenue for electoral warfare by other means.

On the other hand, people may regard the Assembly as a first order institution because of its capacity to deal with day-to-day issues. Under this scenario, there may even be scope for multi-level voting, with electors making decisions based on the actual performance of parties and politicians in the Assembly. Future Assembly elections will offer voters a chance to demonstrate multi-level voting, but given the Assembly's rocky start, there can be few illusions.

Conclusions

A partial validation of the second-order election framework aside, there seems to be little evidence of multi-level voting in the sense of ethnic cleavages eroding. Thus far, devolution has not encouraged movement towards the political centre-ground, nor the prospect of voters crossing communal boundaries. The electoral fortunes of the cross community Alliance Party of Northern Ireland suffered disastrously during the peace process. Similarly, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, which deliberately eschewed taking positions on constitutional issues, failed to secure significant electoral success, (regardless of its other successes in facilitating talks between other parties). If anything, the nature of the peace process has encouraged a re-entrenchment of two sets of nationalism: a northern Irish nationalism and an Ulster British nationalism.

The peace process and subsequent Agreement have emphasised the need to accommodate both sets of nationalism within a single political dispensation. Both were deemed legitimate. They would co-exist and their interaction would be managed through new consociational institutions. Nationalists would remain nationalist, and unionists would remain unionist. Moreover, following ceasefires, legitimacy and inclusion were extended to the more extreme versions of these nationalisms: republicanism and loyalism. The new political dispensation has many merits, and encouraging signs of 'normality' in government are emerging. Yet many of the underlying causes of the conflict remain un-addressed. In many respects, the peace accord represented an 'agreement' rather than a 'settlement'. Reaching such an agreement was no small feat. The basic parameters of the conflict remain however, albeit moderated through a sophisticated array of institutions. In such circumstances, expectations of multi-level voting may be optimistic.

Also apparent are the sensitivities associated with post-accord elections. Rather than marking the symbolic endpoint to a conflict, post-accord elections have the capacity to radicalise and re-entrench the conflict. This raises profound questions for the norms of liberalism and democracy that underpinned many of the international interventions into ethnonational conflicts from the 1990s and beyond. It seems clear that early elections have been counterproductive in a number of locations and have not engendered deep-rooted processes of democratization. This raises awkward questions of alternatives and seeming double standards in which democracy is promoted in one area (Bosnia-Herzegovina) but delayed and hollowed-out in another (Afghanistan).

In many ways Northern Ireland's problems were of a different magnitude to those in other post-accord zones. But Northern Ireland's post-accord elections can offer a number of lessons to other societies embarking on the transition from violent conflict to 'peace'. First, the case illustrates that sophisticated electoral processes designed to maximize inclusivity in deeply divided societies offer few guarantees of an erosion of ethnic cleavages. In simple terms, there are limits to electoral engineering if the bases of

the conflict remain intact. Second, the Northern Ireland case illustrates that although the symbolic value of post-accord elections is high, this is fleeting and less significant than substantial issues such as the outcome of the election. Third, and somewhat counter-intuitively, electoral processes in the midst of on-going or unresolved conflicts can hamper democratisation. Tension from election campaigns to other chambers have disrupted the bedding down of Northern Ireland's Assembly. Ideas of graduated democratisation in which there is an inter-regnum to allow for the development of a democratic culture are worth consideration.

Fourth, concentration on inter-group competition in deeply divided societies often means that intra-group competition receives relatively scant attention. Yet, for many people in post-accord societies, competition within ethnic blocs will be their primary political experience. As a result, civil society initiatives designed to contribute to processes of democratisation may find it necessary to engage in single-identity work as well as cross-community activity. A final lesson from Northern Ireland may be more positive; that post-accord elections do have the capacity to change the boundaries of the conflict and offer opportunities for the emergence of new issues, personnel and political arenas. With time it will become clear if these new issues, personnel and political arenas can outweigh the inheritance of 'old-style' constitutional politics.

Endnotes

[1] The Democratic Unionist Party, although taking their positions as Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive, did not attend ministerial meetings in protest at the presence of Sinn Féin in government. They did participate in committee meetings that involved Sinn Féin though.

[2] Election figures are based on post-election results in the *Irish Times* and from the CAIN website: http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/.
The June 1998 referendum on the Belfast Agreement is not considered here because it was not an election to a specific chamber.

[3] Turnout in the May 1998 referendum on the Agreement was 80.98%. It is also worth noting that turnout was ahead of that in the 1999 elections to the Welsh National Assembly (46.4%) and Scottish Parliament (58.8%).

[4] It may be worth noting that the relatively high turnout recorded for the 2001 local government election may have been because the election was held on the same day as the general election.

[5] The Forum for Political Dialogue had 100 seats, of which 90 were directly elected and the ten parties polling the highest number of votes were awarded two 'top-up' seats each.

[6] The DUP Assembly election manifesto listed the following concerns on the back cover: Unreconstructed terrorists in government; the retention of illegal weapons by terrorists; the plans for the destruction of the RUC; All-Ireland bodies with executive powers; the mass release of terrorists; British sovereignty being eroded.

[7] With dwindling support from his own backbenches, John Major relied on the support of Ulster Unionist MPs to pass the 1993 Maastricht Bill. This did not lead to a formal coalition though. See Major (2000) 378-81.

[8] For an explanation of the electoral system, see 'How delegates were elected', *Irish Times* (1 June 1996).

[9] The *Northern Ireland Life and Times* survey is continuous survey of social attitudes based at the University of Ulster and the Queen's University of Belfast. The survey was conducted *via* face-to-face interviews with an achieved sample of 1800 adults across Northern Ireland. A Postcode Address File (PAF) sampling frame was used, with one adult from the household selected for interview using a Kish grid method. As is common in Northern Ireland, a simple random sample was drawn and stratified across three regions, but without any clustering. The face-to-face interviews were conducted using a computer-assisted technique. A self-completion supplement was given to each respondent at the end of the interview for the field workers to collect at a later date.

References

Arthur, P. 2000. *Special Relationships: Britain, Ireland and the Northern Ireland Problem*. Belfast: Blackstaff.

Bell, C. 2001. *Peace Agreements and Human Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Darby, J. and Mac Ginty, R. 2000. " Northern Ireland: Long cold peace." In J. Darby, and R. Mac Ginty, eds. *The management of peace processes*. Houndmills: Macmillan, pp. 61-106.

Darby, J. and Mac Ginty, R. 2003. *Contemporary Peacemaking: Conflict, violence and peace processes*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Democratic Unionist Party .1998. *Assembly Election Manifesto*.

Democratic Unionist Party.1999. *European Election Manifesto*.

Engel, M .2001. "Marching or skipping to beat of a different drum" (sic), *Guardian*, 25 May.

Fay, M.T., Morrissey, M. and Smyth, M. 1999. *Northern Ireland's Troubles: The human costs*. London: Pluto Press.

Horowitz, D.L. 2002. "Explaining the Northern Ireland Agreement: The sources of an unlikely consensus." *British Journal of Political Science,* Vol. 32, pp.193-220.

Lyons, T. 2002. "The role of postsettlement elections." In S. J. Stedman, D. Rothchild and E. M. Cousens, eds., *Ending Civil Wars: The implementation of peace agreements*. London: Lynne Rienner, pp.215-235.

McAllister, L. 2000. "Changing the landscape: The wider political lessons from recent elections in Wales." *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 2, pp. 211-222.

Mac Ginty R. 2001. "The political use of symbols of accord and discord: Northern Ireland and South Africa." *Civil Wars*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 1-21.

Mac Ginty, R. and Darby, J. 2002. *Guns and Government: The management of the Northern Ireland peace process*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Major, J .2000. *John Major: The autobiography*. London: HarperCollins.

Marsh, M. 1998. "Testing the second-order hypothesis after four European elections." *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 28, pp.591-607.

Mitchell, P. 2001. "Transcending an ethnic party system? The impact of consociational governance on electoral dynamics and the party system." In R Wilford. ed., *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 28-48.

Norris, P. 1997. "Second-order elections revisited." *European Journal of Political Research,* Vol. 31, pp.109-114.

O'Leary, B. and McGarry, J. 1993. *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland*. London: Athlone.

Reif, K. and Schmitt, H. 1980. " Nine second-order national elections: A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results." *European Journal of Political Research,* Vol. 8, pp.3-44.

Reif, K. 1997. "European elections as member state second-order elections." *European Journal of Political Research* , Vol. 31, pp.115-124.

Reilly, B. and Reynolds , A. 1999. *Electoral systems and conflict in divided societies* Washington DC: National Academy Press.

Reilly, B. 2001. *Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral engineering for conflict management* . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reilly, B. 2003. "Democratic validation." In J. Darby & R. Mac Ginty, eds., *Contemporary Peacemaking: Conflict, violence and peace processes.* Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 174-183.

Sinn Féin.1998a. Election communication entitled 'Delivering real change'. Unpublished paper.

Sinn Féin .1998b. Election communication for the Foyle constituency entitled 'Towards a future as equals'. Unpublished paper.

Sisk, T. and Reynolds , A. 1998. *Elections and conflict management in Africa* Washington DC: USIP Press.

Ulster Unionist Party .1998. UUP Election Communication for the Foyle Constituency. Unpublished paper.

Ulster Unionist Party. 2001. Election communication for the East Belfast Constituency. Unpublished paper.

United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP). 1998. Election Communication for the Fermanagh South Tyrone Constituency. Unpublished paper.

Whyte, J. 1991. *Interpreting Northern Ireland* .Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wilford, R. and Wilson, R. 2000. "A bare knuckle rise: Northern Ireland." In R. Hazell, ed., *The State and the Nations: The first year of devolution in the UK*. London: Imprint Academic, pp. 79-116.

Wilford, R. 2001. *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Zartman, I.W. 1989. *Ripe for resolution: Conflict and intervention in Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press.

.
.